

The Social Logic of Late Nihilism. Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt on Global Space and the Sites of Gods

JON WITTRÖCK

School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, 14189 Huddinge, Sweden.
Email: jon.wittrock@sh.se

This article compares, thematically, two prominent but problematical twentieth-century critics of nihilism: Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. Both spoke of the spread of a global space, tied to tendencies towards the reduction of everything to a reserve of resources, a development both connected to a pursuit of intense but ultimately insignificant experiences. For Schmitt, nihilism stems from the disconnection of the global order from its European, Christian origins. For Heidegger, nihilism represents, rather, the culmination of a European, metaphysical tradition. Furthermore, while Schmitt appears to see a counterpoint to nihilism in the sacred sites of Christianity, representing the ultimate metaphysical exception of Christian revelation, Heidegger proposes a view of sacred sites as tied to the appearance of a god as something strange and enigmatic, which has often been reduced within Christian, theological thought. In conclusion, I situate the two critiques in relation to Karl Jasper's notion of an Axial Age and the developments of a contemporary global space. This way of situating the two critiques will show how Heidegger actively attempted to handle two fundamental developments which Schmitt sought to elude: the increasingly intense relativisation of Christianity in relation to other major religious traditions, and the relativisation of claims concerning religious revelations and theophanies in relation to the scientific and technological spatiality and temporality of the global space.

Die Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, ein Trieb, überall zu Hause zu sein.
(Novalis¹)

Two of the most prominent thinkers of the twentieth century who critically examined and sought to relate to what they perceived as a condition of global nihilism, also happen to have supported one of its most murderous and generally detested regimes: Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger share the curious merit of being probably the two most continuously influential intellectuals to have openly and actively supported the National Socialist takeover in Germany.

This dubious distinction, however, is not all that unites the two: they were also both from a Catholic background,² and both began, to an extent, as outsiders in a German academic environment in which they nevertheless made spectacular careers during the years of the Weimar Republic. Furthermore, conceptually both came to advance, in their respective later phases, which in both cases can be said to begin sometime in the mid-1930s, a polemic against a global nihilism which both spoke of in terms of the opposition between a growing global space, constituted by an instrumental approach to reality as a whole, threatening those sites which they counterpose to it. Nevertheless, or perhaps partly because of these similarities, the two neither were personal friends – despite having some important shared acquaintances³ – nor expressed unquestioned admiration for each other's work.⁴

This being said, the many similarities, as well as the apparent personal and intellectual distance between the two, do make a thematic comparison tempting, especially in the light of the vast and continued influence these two thinkers have had on contemporary academic debates in a number of disciplines including legal and political theory, international relations and philosophy.⁵ Briefly, where the two broadly agree is on the expansion of a measurable global spatiality and temporality, open to scientific and technological comprehension and manipulation. Furthermore, they both relate the expansion of these modes of grasping and inhabiting space to a specific dynamic of rational planning and the pursuit of experiences, which both sketch in similar ways. Where they differ is in the formulation of their respective historical narratives on nihilism as well as in their understanding of those sites which they counterpose to the logic of contemporary nihilism.

In the following, I will compare these as of convergence and divergence, respectively. Then, I will situate the two critiques in relation to Karl Jaspers' narrative on an 'Axial Age' in relation to a present global space, in order to grasp why Heidegger opposed 're-active' attempts to engage with nihilism and how this is relevant to the comparison between his approach and that of Schmitt. Because of the limited format of an article, my presentations of the positions of the two will have to be compact, but not, I hope, to the point of caricature, and I will attempt to somewhat compensate for brevity by way of clarity.

Global Space and the Dynamic of Modern Nihilism

Let us begin, then, with the broad convergence between Schmitt and Heidegger in the portrayal of a global, technological space. We must distinguish, first, between struggles in and of (or concerning) space: between on the one hand the competition for space and resources between political entities such as states or empires, and on the other hand the strife between different ways of conceptualising and experiencing space – or what we could call 'spatiality'. It is the latter with which we are presently concerned.

In fact, the expansion of a certain type of spatiality and temporality worldwide constitutes one of the key traits of global nihilism, according to both thinkers, and it has continued unabated, regardless of the outcome of world wars and cold wars; this

is one of the reasons why Heidegger can maintain, late in life, that the Second World War ‘decided nothing’.⁶ The war did of course decide the outcome of violent struggles in space, not to mention the fate of millions, the fall of authoritarian rule in large parts of the world and the disruption of the Nazi machinery of the extermination camps, but it did not prevent the continued expansion of a certain type of spatiality and temporality worldwide.

As Schmitt puts it, ‘The world is not in space, but space is in the world.’⁷ There is, Schmitt implies, no simply given way of conceptualising and experiencing space, but the way in which we interpret space can itself become politicised, or conversely, depoliticised, in the sense that one way of interpreting space comes to be accepted as given, often without reflection.

Both Schmitt and Heidegger, then, agree on the spread of a certain type of spatiality, a way of thinking and experiencing space. And while they both, of course, have things to say, about the struggles in space – the struggle between great powers for territory and resources – when we speak of a global space of nihilism, we are speaking of the struggle of space, the struggle concerning spatiality, i.e. how we experience and think space itself. Thus we are speaking of the diffusion globally of, in Schmitt’s succinct formulation, an ‘empty and overwhelming, mathematically and geographically determined spatial dimension.’⁸ This is space grasped as mathematically calculable and accessible as a resource.

Heidegger and Schmitt both insist that this way of conceptualising and experiencing space, furthermore, is tied to a broader trend, typical of Western modernity, which they both relate to technology – not, however, fundamentally in the sense of technological systems and artefacts, but rather of a metaphysical disposition underlying the latter. This disposition Heidegger eventually came to label ‘Enframing’,⁹ while Schmitt called it ‘technicity’.¹⁰ These terms both refer to a more general stance of humanity towards the surrounding world as well as the self, a stance characterised by the domination of instrumental rationality and the conceptualisation of reality as calculable, rendering possible the advances in technology and technological systems. Thus, Enframing, according to Heidegger, constitutes a ‘mode of revealing’ everything that is as a reserve of resources in the pursuit of instrumental aims. And likewise, to Schmitt, technicity signifies ‘the belief in unlimited power and the domination of man over nature, even over human nature...’ (Ref. 10, p. 94).

This metaphysical stance, however, in turn, is accompanied by an attendant dynamic of, on the one hand, the erection of purposive-rational instrumental plans and schemes, and on the other, a pursuit of intense experiences. In the terminology used by Heidegger, this is a matter of ‘machination’ and ‘lived experience’. It should be noted that the German original for machination, *Machenschaft*, has clear connotations to *machen*, or ‘make’/‘produce’, thus making for a polemical pun implying that the instrumental-rational schemes of the modern world are somehow manipulative and devious. Integrated into a myriad of supposedly rational plans, things appear as calculable objects, which can then be connected to each other in instrumental schemes, as flexible, interchangeable parts, ultimately, of a vast reserve of resources. Which development in turn, Heidegger proposes, enables but

simultaneously provokes the pursuit of intense experiences: “‘Lived experience’...is the publicness (accessibility to everyone) of the mysterious, i.e., the exciting, provocative, stunning, and enchanting...”¹¹ Schmitt, similarly, albeit in a somewhat more fragmentary manner, criticised the connection of instrumental planning and the pursuit of intense experiences; this is a recurring polemical theme throughout his work. What Schmitt feared the most was the prospect of the combination of efficient networks of production with the consumption of goods and the pursuit of intense, but ultimately insignificant, experiences (cf. Ref. 10, p. 70).

On the whole, then, Schmitt and Heidegger broadly agree in their portrayal of the global expansion of a mode of spatiality and temporality characterised by being mathematically calculable, and underlying which is a metaphysical stance which implies that everything that is can become available to human manipulation and control, and thus be integrated within the confines of purposive-rational plans and technological systems; which development, in turn, both provokes and renders possible a pursuit of intense experiences. But why – if we accept, for the sake of argument, this description of global nihilism – is this development problematical?

Nihilism and the Site

In Schmitt’s understanding, nihilism ultimately consists of the disconnection of ‘order’ from ‘orientation’ (Ref. 8, p. 66). Fundamentally, an order, according to Schmitt, consists of processes of appropriation, distribution, and production: ‘In every stage of social life, in every economic order, in every period of legal history until now, things have been appropriated, distributed, and produced’ (Ref. 8, p. 327). The order of states that developed during the centuries following the discovery of America and the religious wars was eminently Eurocentric, meaning that its ‘bracketing’ of war, which Schmitt praises – i.e. its constriction of enmity according to rules of conflict entailing a respect for the enemy and, ideally, a limitation of violence (Ref. 8, p. 140)¹² – was indeed restricted to Europe, while the rest of the world, as well as the oceans, remained open to European exploitation and unlimited warfare (cf. Ref. 8, p. 184). Furthermore, the key point, for Schmitt, is that this Eurocentric order of states was still mainly Christian, regardless of which Church was dominant in each of its constituent states. Thus, Schmitt insists, the European order of states was indeed rooted in a specific, Eurocentric orientation and tied to Christianity. Here, however, we have to nuance the latter connection.

Schmitt contrasts two forms of rationality: on the one hand, what he calls ‘occidental rationalism’, which has, at times, pervaded both theology and jurisprudence; on the other, technicity. What characterises the two types and separates them from each other is that the former, according to Schmitt, relates to the exception, whereas the latter seeks to construe coherent systems without exceptions. In occidental rationalism, exceptions are seen as fundamental to the system as a whole, and the relation to these fundamental exceptions is constitutive of a systematic order. Schmitt, then, does not oppose systematicity per se, but he wants the system to be explicitly related to something outside of it, and he typically understands that relation

as constitutive for the system as a whole. Jurisprudence, when it takes on the form of legal positivism – which Schmitt criticises – aims, he says, to construct coherent, closed systems of ‘uninterrupted unity and order’: systems, that is, without exceptions: ‘everything that contradicts the system is excluded as impure.’¹³ Likewise, theology may come under the sway of technicity, with the result that ‘God ... sub-consciously is made the motor impelling the cosmic machine.’¹⁴ And again, when considering the theory of sovereignty, Schmitt states that ‘The exception reveals most clearly the essence of the state’s authority’ (Ref. 13, p. 13). Thus, he declares, ‘Sovereign is he who decides on the exception’ (Ref. 13, p. 5), and argues against attempts to repress or deny sovereignty.

The main point here, however, is that Schmitt is contrasting, throughout his works, two distinct modes of rationalism, rather than simply contrasting different disciplines: on the one hand, attempts at constructing closed systems without exceptions, on the other hand, systematic thought which also tries to think about those fundamental exceptions, which are constitutive to the system as a whole. Now, our way of conceptualising and experiencing space may, Schmitt implies, exemplify either of these two types of thought: thus, he says, the space of technicity, that type of calculable spatiality which is common in the modern world, is bereft of ‘sacred sites’, and thus lacks ‘sacred orientations’ (Ref. 8, pp. 43, 78).¹⁵ The sacred site signifies a metaphysical exception: something transcendent that enters into the world. Thus, the sacred sites of Christianity represent the exception of Christ, which enters our world and transforms it. The global space of technicity, however, constitutes a mathematical abstraction lacking of such a transcendent connection. For Schmitt, then, the sacred site constitutes a spatial exception and the relation to that exception is constitutive of the spatial order as a whole: it signifies its Christian ‘orientation’.

The later Heidegger, like Schmitt, speaks of a site, which is tied to the appearance of (a) god. We should take care, however, to note that Heidegger uses two major concepts here, which can both be translated into the English ‘site’ – on the one hand, *Ort des Wohnens*, or ‘site of human dwelling’, on the other, *Augenblicks-Stätte*, or ‘site of the moment’.¹⁶ How are these two, then, tied to each other? In his *Letter on ‘Humanism’*, Heidegger turns to a fragment by Heraclitus in speaking of the site of human dwelling ‘The fragment says: The human being dwells, insofar as he is a human being, in the nearness of god.’ And in another enigmatic sentence, he adds that ‘Heraclitus himself says that “The (familiar) abode for humans is the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one).”’¹⁷ This site of human dwelling, then, is tied to the appearance or absence of gods, and this is a recurring theme throughout his later works.

We must take care, however, not to misread Heidegger here: ‘Thinking “about” gods and be-ing’, he writes in one major later work, ‘describes nothing pre-given.’¹⁸ ‘Rather,’ he explicates, ‘gods and their godhood arise ... from out of the truth of be-ing’ and thus, ‘for instance, the thingly representation of god and the explanatory reckoning with god as the creator are grounded in the representation of beingness as produced...’ (Ref. 18, p. 209). The strange ‘be-ing’ in the quotations above is a translation of Heidegger’s common usage of the archaic spelling *Seyn* for the German

Sein, i.e. 'being'. But the main point here is that 'the god' does not refer to some entity with known properties, but rather to those symbols and narratives which humanity turns to in confronting an ultimate uncertainty in experiences of awe and wonder (Ref. 18, p. 203).

Such experiences, furthermore, can be both solitary and communal. Hence, Heidegger speaks of the feast or festival as entailing, first, a cessation of the daily routine of ordinary activities and the division of labour. Furthermore, however, it grants us the opportunity to experience a more acute awareness of wonder.¹⁹ Once the god is transformed into a concept enveloped by fixed doctrines, however, Heidegger says, the result is a distanced deity of cognitive concepts: 'Before the *causa sui*,' he remarks, caustically, 'man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this God.'²⁰ Schmitt, on the contrary, in his most explicitly Catholic phase, cautions against 'Dionysian cults, ecstasies, and the dangers of submerging reason in meditation.' Indeed, it was one of the great virtues of the Roman Catholic Church that it 'knowingly and magnificently succeeded in overcoming' such practices (Ref. 14, p. 14) These two quotations, from different phases in the trajectories of the respective thinkers, are nonetheless indicative of a broader trend, in the sense that Schmitt repeatedly lauded rationalism in the sense of systematic thought, as long as that thought is tied to an understanding of the key role of constitutive exceptions, whereas Heidegger came to explicitly oppose systematicity. Even so, however, the actual picture is more complex.

Nihilism and History

At the heart of Heidegger's later thought there is a dilemma not wholly unlike that confronting the reader of Hobbes, a thinker who on the one hand emphasises the 'constant signification of words', and on the other hand places at the core of his system the dark and ambiguous figure of Leviathan.²¹ Conversely, Heidegger states, in his posthumously published later magnum opus, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, that 'The age of the "systems" has past' (Ref. 12, p. 6). Trying to decipher the later Heidegger's strange neologisms, one may remember the story of the Russian dancer 'who was asked by someone what she meant by a certain dance. She answered with some exasperation, "If I could say it in so many words, do you think I should take the very great trouble of dancing it?"'²² Nevertheless, there is no denying that Heidegger's later works do include conceptual layers which are certainly possible to reconstruct and present in a systematic fashion. What is at stake here, then, is not simply Schmitt the rationalist opposing Heidegger the poetic author of strange fragments, but rather different ways of approaching nihilism and history.²³

If Schmitt has a sweeping perspective on human history, it seems to be, ultimately, a political-theological one, joined to a commitment to an understanding of Christian revelation. This is why Schmitt can formulate an understanding of the political, allowing for many different 'political entities' – city-states, empires, nation-states, large spaces²⁴ – while simultaneously being committed to an understanding of 'occidental rationalism' as the connection of system and exception, where the

ultimate metaphysical exception is tied to Christ. Thus, some commentators try to disconnect Schmitt's understanding of the political from this connection, in order to use him for other purposes. Schmitt's own view, however, is that what he calls technicity is dangerous exactly because it fundamentally represses this relation to Christ, and thus technicity is at root 'satanic' (Ref. 10, p. 94).

Heidegger, for his part, proposes, in his later phase, a sweeping view of history which is in the first instance centred on ancient Greece and the relation between it and the pathologies of the contemporary world. Heidegger, famously, traces the appearance of reality as calculable resources, that tendency he calls Enframing, historically to a 'first beginning' in ancient Greece, in the rise of grand metaphysical systems and the emerging fixation of reality in mathematics and theoretical systems, whose development continued throughout the Roman and Christian eras and with even greater intensity in the modern sciences. While the Greeks, Heidegger indicates, counterbalanced their metaphysical thought with an openness to wonder (cf. Ref. 12, pp. 18, 141, 148), that latter element came to be increasingly obscured, resulting ultimately in a modern understanding of reality as increasingly consisting of a reserve of resources, to be incorporated as flexible, interchangeable elements in purposive-rational plans. Heidegger traces the roots of Enframing to a coercive power, a desire to control and dominate which, he claims, simultaneously entails an absence of mastery – or in other words, a failure to restrain and control that very desire, often unreflected, for domination (Ref. 18, p. 12).²⁵ Thus, Heidegger speaks of the 'consummation of nihilism' to summarise the global spread of these trends, implying, to conclude, 'the beginning of a world civilization that is based upon Western European thinking.'²⁶

Distinguishing between history as a mere chronological sequence and what he calls 'the history of being', Heidegger plays on the difference in German between *Historie* and *Geschichte* – both of which can be translated as 'history' – and ties the latter, which he uses for his history of being, to the German words *schicken*, 'to send', and *Geschick*, 'fate' or 'destiny' (Ref. 9, p. 24). In a later work, Heidegger further explicates on his notion of 'epoch': 'To hold back is, in Greek, *epoche*. Hence we speak of the epochs of the destiny of Being. Epoch does not mean here a span of time in occurrence, but rather', he adds, 'the actual holding-back of itself in favor of the discernibility of the gift, that is, of Being with regard to the grounding of beings.'²⁷ It is statements such as these that have led some critics to denounce Heidegger as a prophetic thinker attempting to create 'an authentic German religion' in which 'being' more or less takes the place of the monotheist God.²⁸ Furthermore, other critics have pointed out that Heidegger's 'account of Western history inexplicably omits Hebrew, Stoic, neo-Platonic, early medieval, and Renaissance thought' and entails 'a pessimistic evaluation of history' which 'highlights the faults of the present age, while ignoring those of the past.'²⁹ The confusion only seems to increase as Heidegger introduces the concept of *Ereignis*, literally 'event', while claiming that it 'can no more be translated than the Greek *λόγος* or the Chinese Tao' (Ref. 20, p. 36).

According a prime importance to this enigmatic notion, Heidegger appears to indicate that it is closely connected to the way in which a historical world, or epoch, is

constituted. Various interpreters have tried to make sense of this, arriving at widely distinct conclusions³⁰ – what I consider to be the most fruitful and plausible interpretation, is this: when using the notion of *Ereignis*, Heidegger does not primarily speak of ‘events’ in an ordinary sense of the word. Rather, in a way typical of his later phase, he is using it subversively in relation to an ordinary understanding, to indicate an experience that makes us reconsider the way in which we understand our existence as a whole – such an experience, whether corresponding to an external ‘event’ or not, is an *Ereignis*. Thus, we could see Christian revelation as an *Ereignis*, but the same could be said of other experiences of wonder and awe throughout human history.

What matters, however, is whether such experiences become symbolically sedimented, that is, whether they come to be constitutive of new ‘epochs’, whether they introduce new ways of interpreting our existence, which are transmitted to subsequent generations. Ultimately, human history is pervaded by these ruptures. Thus, when Heidegger famously says in an interview that ‘Only a god can save us’,³¹ this could be understood as: only a shared name for experiences of wonder and awe can save us from the predicament of contemporary, global technological civilisation, with its tendencies to reduce everything to a reserve of resources.

The problem, for Heidegger, is that he appears neither to believe that he is himself offering such a shared understanding, nor does he seem to believe in a collective return to any existing organised religion or, after his disillusionment with National Socialism, in any political ideology (cf. Ref. 12, p. 9 and Ref. 17, p. 296). Schmitt, however, does not have the same problem: for him, the danger of the contemporary world is that people turn away from serious decisions and ultimately from Christian revelation, in favour of a comfortable life of production and consumption. Yet, the solution is there, in embracing Christian revelation and fighting for an order that recognises it.

Heidegger, Schmitt, and the Axial Age

How, then, ought we to handle these two critiques? I propose to situate them in relation to a third major theory of historical development, that of Karl Jaspers and his notion of an ‘Axial Age’.³² Jaspers’ historical narrative is arguably superior to that of either Schmitt or Heidegger in the sense (but not necessarily thereby in all respects) that it attempted to capture the growth of major religious traditions on a global scale. Regardless of the problems of Jaspers’ original formulation of the theory, it remains a fruitful perspective allowing for a comparative perspective on the growth of major religious and philosophical traditions.

The claim made by Jaspers in his 1949 *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* was that several transformations could be seen as parts of a larger pattern within larger cultural spaces across the Eurasian landmass in the first millennium BC.

Thus, Jaspers proposed, Greek philosophy, inventions in Hindu and Buddhist thought, Jewish prophecy, and even Confucianism, could be grasped as related, both chronologically and in terms of recurring basic conceptual and institutional patterns.³³

Jaspers chose the term 'Axial Age' for this epoch, and this is the name that was revived, prominently by Shmuel Eisenstadt, in building upon Jasper's original hypothesis. Eisenstadt, indeed, came to point out several typical traits, emerging out of the axial transformations. First, the division between an immanent and a transcendent world was formulated, in which the latter could be seen as superior, and thus offering a promise of salvation from the suffering of this world. Second, this, in turn, resulted in a tension, in which these promises gave rise to the problem of how to attain salvation, or liberation from this-worldly suffering and injustice, spurring, thirdly, the emergence of new thinkers and movements, which came to compete, both with established elites and with each other, for the control of symbolic communication, and pertaining to their respective paths to salvation and liberation.³⁴

Surely, the general traits of axial age transformations have to be qualified in many ways. On the one hand, there is much room for discussion about the similarities and differences between traditions as far apart, conceptually and spatially, as for example Confucianism and Christianity.³⁵ Furthermore, we need to distinguish between the Axial Age as a historical epoch – crystallising in the first millennium BC – and those conceptual and institutional innovations that came out of this epoch, and continued to influence subsequent historical transformations, notably those of Late Antiquity, and perhaps including the rise of Islam. Historically, the latter transformations do not belong to the Axial Age, but in terms of their conceptual and institutional traits, they can surely be perceived as its coming to fruition once again.³⁶

Regardless of the difficulties inherent both in Jaspers' original formulation of the theory, and continued debates regarding it, however, it arguably remains a more fruitful framework for situating the global transformations both Schmitt and Heidegger tried to come to terms with, than either of their own more Eurocentric historical narratives. Specifically, such an approach allows us to understand with greater clarity some of the major conceptual choices made by Heidegger, and to understand their motivation. Even more specifically, we can come to perceive why Heidegger would dismiss 'the exclusively re-active attempts to oppose nihilism that, instead of entering into a critical encounter with its essence, undertake a restoration of the past' (Ref. 17, p. 296). What would motivate such a condemnation (which strongly implies that Schmitt's critique of nihilism was ultimately, according to this view of Heidegger's, re-active)?

Why would a Christian response, such as Schmitt's, be flawed in the contemporary world? I do not mean to go into a detailed criticism of particular arguments of Schmitt. On the whole, despite his obviously reprehensible political affiliations (a flaw the two thinkers share) he tried to interpret Christianity specifically in relation to the contemporary world, and formulate a critique that is Christian, yet takes the perceived dangers of technological developments into account. So we cannot dismiss Schmitt easily here, along the lines that he would have failed to see the specifically modern dangers of technology.

The problem, however, is that whether we like it or not we are in the midst of the most radical transformation at least since the Axial Age, as we are *de facto* creating a global space. Christianity arose in the world-space of Late Antiquity, but any

response today has to take a truly global space into account, and the formation of the latter, which is the culmination of processes that have been ongoing for centuries, implies the most novel transformation since the Axial Age. This is a development we have to take into account, no matter what our own position or background, if we are part of and do not wish to withdraw, physically and/or mentally, from this global space.

The most immediately obvious challenge of this global space is that any belief is now relativised with much greater intensity than ever before. Simply put, it seems impossible for a thinking person, who is integrated into this global space, with interactions that are instantaneously interlinked across vast distances, to relate to one's own eventual religious tradition without somehow taking this effect of constant comparison into account. The relation to one's own belief thus changes, even if one maintains it, and however challenges are met, i.e. with calls for dialogue, or a violent rejection of the alternatives, or some other option. Another challenge following from this global space, however, is one that both Heidegger and Schmitt perceived with a great degree of clarity, i.e. that it also entails the growth of calculable ways of both theorising and experiencing space and time, with their own dangers.

This implies a second great challenge to the Axial traditions. Any theophany or religious revelation is relativised not simply in the sense outlined above, by being placed side by side with other theophanies, revelations, or assertions of belief, with a much greater intensity than ever before. It is also relativised in the sense of being placed side by side with calculable, scientific modes of spatiality and temporality, which exert an immensely charismatic, attractive force by recourse to the stunning technological advances they result in. Claims to theophanies or revelations can thus be challenged by adherents of the ontological or epistemological primacy of scientific spatiality and temporality.

Schmitt is addressing the latter challenge, but not the former, and hence his way of addressing the latter, too (calling it 'satanic'), is weakened. Any assertion of belief, if it aims to challenge or counter dominant forms of life of the contemporary world, can be relativised by any other, and also relativised in relation to a scientific spatiality and temporality. That is why Schmitt's response could be considered 're-active', if we accept Heidegger's formulation. In the former case, that of traditions becoming increasingly relativised in relation to each other, Heidegger tried to formulate an understanding, as we have seen, according to which 'gods' are names for a gathering around the mysterious and enigmatic, those experiences which elude our attempts at cognitive and epistemological control. There is a tension between the Germanocentric tendencies in Heidegger's works, and his attempts to formulate a more general understanding of the global 'consummation of nihilism', which does not necessarily imply a specifically German response, and which is not really reliant on his assertions concerning the elevated status of the German language.³⁷

As for the latter challenge, that of any such experience being relativised in relation to calculable, scientific modes of approaching space and time, Heidegger argued that while scientific theories may indeed be correct (or incorrect), they move exactly within the circle of correctness. They are never, however, 'true' in a deeper sense (cf. Ref. 12, p. 282). Thus, he argued that while such theories may indeed be considered correct,

they provide us with a view of reality exactly as it appears when we approach it in order to control it in the pursuit, ultimately, of pragmatic aims. Such views tend to be tied, he argued, to a kind of violence, linked to purposive-rational plans or schemes.

What unites both Schmitt and Heidegger, however, is a focus on the risks of instrumental reduction, a focus transcending human as well as animal rights, while not, however, entailing any kind of ‘ecological’ critique – rather, their focus was on the instrumental relation per se, as opposed to other ways of relating to potentially anything. In that sense, both of them anticipated contemporary discussions on the sacred. Even more intriguingly, we may perhaps recover a notion of the withdrawing of certain domains, a more abstract notion of patterns of action in relation to both living and non-living beings, as well as sites and temporal intervals, that can be, but do not have to be, tied to narratives we consider as ‘religious’. In the end, our estimation of the eventual continued relevance of the critiques of nihilism surveyed in this essay, may depend on whether we perceive such an approach as a fruitful one to be developed further, or not.

References and Notes

1. Novalis (1929) *Fragmente* (Dresden: Wolfgang Jess Verlag), p. 76. I saw these lines written on the wall of a house a few years ago in Weimar, on my way to the *Nietzsche-Archiv*.
2. It should be noted that both men came to have a strained relationship to the Catholic Church, although buried as a Catholic, Heidegger shifted allegiances throughout his life, while Schmitt, for his part, was excommunicated due to complications regarding his second marriage: as Balakrishnan puts it, Schmitt ‘had married, in a moment of passion, a somewhat disreputable woman’, in G. Balakrishnan (2000) *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London & New York: Verso), p. 62. After this first wife eloped, Schmitt remarried without having succeeded in having his marriage annulled by the Church, and was hence excommunicated – a strange experience for an explicitly Catholic thinker. For a review of Heidegger’s complicated relationship with Catholicism and the Catholic Church, see J.D. Caputo (2006) Heidegger and theology. In: C.B. Guignon, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 326–344.
3. For example, Ernst Jünger, who exerted a considerable influence on Heidegger’s critique of technology; although the two diverged on many points, they nevertheless respected each other and engaged in a fruitful dialogue over the years; cf. M. Heidegger (2004) *Gesamtausgabe IV. Abteilung: Hinweise und Aufzeichnungen, Band 90: Zu Ernst Jünger* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann).
4. Cf., for example, C. Schmitt (1991) *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), in which there are several comments on Heidegger (consult the index for Heidegger’s name), and M. Heidegger (2011) *Gesamtausgabe IV. Abteilung: Hinweise und Aufzeichnungen, Band 86: Seminare: Hegel-Schelling* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), pp. 72, 173.
5. The literature on both thinkers has become vast – pertaining to the thinking on global space and site/place, one may mention for example, in the case of Heidegger, the works of Jeff Malpas, e.g. the recent (2012) *Heidegger and the*

- Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), and in the case of Schmitt, S. Legg (ed.) (2011) *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos* (London: Routledge).
6. M. Heidegger (1976) *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 66.
 7. Cf. C. Schmitt (1981) *Land und Meer: Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Köln: Hohenheim), p. 106 (original quotation in German: 'Die Welt ist nicht im Raum, sondern der Raum ist in der Welt.').
 8. C. Schmitt (2003) *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press), p. 283. Although Schmitt is referring, in this quotation, to American power politics in the Western Hemisphere, this development accords with the general spread of this type of spatiality.
 9. Cf. M. Heidegger (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 19. The original German term is *Ge-stell* for 'Enframing'. Heidegger used other terms, however, before coining *Ge-stell*, which, it should be noted, brings together meanings associated with German verbs like *bestellen*, 'to order', *feststellen*, 'to ascertain', and *aufstellen*, 'to position', 'to arrange', or 'to establish'. Note that I consistently capitalise *Enframing*, but not *technicity*; in so doing, I merely follow the convention of the translators of the texts to which I am referring – in German, there is no difference, since all nouns are capitalised.
 10. Cf. C. Schmitt (2007) *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), p. 85.
 11. M. Heidegger (2012) *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 87.
 12. This notion of the 'bracketing' of war in Europe is of course somewhat simplified, as Schmitt himself indeed admitted: cf. C. Schmitt (2007) *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political* (New York: Telos Press), p. 9. (footnote).
 13. C. Schmitt (2005) *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), pp. 20–21.
 14. C. Schmitt (1996) *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport & London: Greenwood Press), p. 13.
 15. In the German original, Schmitt uses the terms *geweihten Stätten* and *sakrale Ortung*: cf. C. Schmitt (1988) *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), p. 14. Given that Schmitt uses the German terms *Ordnung* and *Ortung*, it is puzzling that he ties them to the word *Stätte*, rather than *Ort*, which would have, in itself, functioned as well in German, and would have fit very nicely with the previously mentioned terms.
 16. For the former term see, for example, M. Heidegger (1976) *Gesamtausgabe: II. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914-1970, Band 9: Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), p. 354. for the latter, for example, M. Heidegger (1989) *Gesamtausgabe: III. Abteilung: Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen, Vorträge – Gedachtes, Band 65: Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), p. 30.
 17. M. Heidegger (1998) *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 269. 271.
 18. M. Heidegger (2006) *Mindfulness* (New York: Continuum), p. 205.
 19. Cf. M. Heidegger (1982) *Gesamtausgabe: II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944, Band 52: Hölderlins Hymne 'Andenken'* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), p. 64.

20. M. Heidegger (2002) *Identity and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 72.
21. T. Hobbes (1994) *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668* (Indianapolis: Hackett), p. 261.
22. R. Hughes (2005) Introduction. In W. Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* (London: Vintage), p. v.
23. For further nuances, cf. C. Schmitt (1963) *Der Begriff des Politischen: Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), pp. 9–19.
24. Schmitt came to speak of ‘large spaces’ as a possible successor to nation-states. Exactly what characterises a large space, however, remains unclear. Cf. W. Hooker (2009) *Carl Schmitt’s International Thought: Order and Orientation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 126–155, for a succinct discussion of this issue.
25. In the German original, Heidegger contrasts *Gewalt* or *Macht* with *Herrschaft*: cf. M. Heidegger (1997) *Gesamtausgabe: III. Abteilung: Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen, Vorträge – Gedachtes, Band 66: Besinnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), p. 16. It should be noted that the German *Gewalt* has connotations beyond ‘coercive force’ in a narrower sense: it can refer to violence in the sense of brute force (*rohe Gewalt*) as well as to legislature (*gesetzgebende Gewalt*) and public authority (*öffentliche Gewalt*).
26. M. Heidegger (2009) *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (London & New York: Routledge), p. 435.
27. M. Heidegger (2002) *On Time and Being* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), p. 9.
28. Cf. H. Philipse (1998) *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Being: a Critical Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 382.
29. M. Zimmerman (2001) The ontological decline of the west. In R. Polt and G. Fried (eds) *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press), pp. 203–204.
30. Some have stressed an understanding of *Ereignis* as ‘the ultimate *praesuppositum* of everything we are and do.’ As a consequence, ‘Whether we reflect on *Ereignis* or ignore it, whether we embrace it as the ground of our being or flee from it, it is always the presupposed.’ T. Sheehan (2001) *Kehre and Ereignis: a prolegomenon to Introduction to Metaphysics*. In: R. Polt and G. Fried (eds) *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 13. Cf. also for example S. Crowell and J. Malpas (eds) (2007) *Transcendental Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press). In a succinct essay entitled, simply, *Ereignis*. In: H. Dreyfus and M. Wrathal (eds) (2005) *A Companion to Heidegger* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 375–391, R. Polt delineates three different usages throughout Heidegger’s works. Suffice to say that the notion of *Ereignis* remains enigmatic and there are many different interpretations.
31. M. Heidegger (2003) *Philosophical and Political Writings* (New York & London: Continuum), p. 38.
32. As H. Joas observes in (2012) The axial age debate as religious discourse. In: R. Bellah and H. Joas (eds) *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), the notion of an ‘Axial Age’ may have resulted from Jaspers confusing a quote by Hegel, to which he indirectly refers, in which Hegel speaks, in German, of ‘Angel’, rather than ‘Achse’.
33. Cf. K. Jaspers (1949) *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis Verlag).

34. Cf. S. Eisenstadt's (1986) Introduction. In: S. Eisenstadt, (ed.) *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press), for a succinct summary.
35. As R. Bellah observes in (2011) *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 576, 'Mencius, for example, but many Confucians before and after him, bemoaned the sad state of society, the corruption of the rulers, and the oppression of the peasantry, and offered an alternative form of government: rule by moral example, by conformity with the *li*, the normative order, and not by punishment. The Confucian hope for an ethical ruler who would follow Confucian injunctions did not involve any idea of divine intervention, except a vague notion that Heaven would eventually punish behaviour that was too outrageous, but it was in its own way as utopian as the prophetic hope of ancient Israel.' Cf. also for example C. Taylor (2012) What was the axial revolution? In: R. Bellah and H. Joas, (eds) *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
36. Cf., for example, J. Arnason, S. Eisenstadt and B. Wittrock (eds) (2005) *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden & Boston: Brill), pp. 11–12; and J. Casanova (2012) Religion, the Axial Age, and secular modernity in Bellah's theory of religious evolution. In: R. Bellah and H. Joas (eds) *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
37. M. Heidegger (1991) *Nietzsche, Volume IV: Nihilism* (New York: HarperCollins), p. 37.

About the Author

Jon Wittrock holds a Doctorate in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute, where he successfully defended his PhD thesis, entitled *Beyond Burgenland and Kakanien? Post-National Politics in Europe: Political Justification and Critical Deliberation*, in 2008. His major interests are in critical and political theory and especially concern the intersection between religion and politics, where the meaning of neither of these concepts is in any simple way taken for granted. He has also focused on German philosophical critiques of nihilism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and argued for their continued relevance in the contemporary world.